

UTAH

VERY MUCH In Search of the Greatest Snow on Earth

Words: Mike Austin Photos: Russ Shea

Some time back in November, veteran UK snapper Russ Shea suggested I get involved with a trip to North America he was cooking up. Utah was the mission, freeriding the goal. My only knowledge of Utah before then was that JP Walker was from there and... well, that was pretty much it. A quick look at Google Earth revealed a lot of flat-looking desert surrounding the capital of Salt Lake City. Park City was close by, which is (or was) JP's stomping ground. I had visions of endless parks full of jib-able junk and rails... But no, powder it was, and having located the resort Russ mentioned, Brian Head, I realised we were heading way down south – about six hours from Salt Lake.

We flew out in February. At Chicago airport, awaiting our connection, we got our first taste of US culture at a small diner style burger joint with a sports bar attached. We were all pretty wired. Dom shouted in the beers (after the obligatory I.D check) and we minged out for about an hour, hogging the seats.

“What's Chicago famous for?” someone asked.

“Buck Rogers?” I said. Why that's the only thing that came into my head I don't know. But neither Russ nor Dom had anything to add. So that was Chicago.

At Salt Lake City we were met by the Kern brothers, Seb and Nate, who had driven all the way over from their winter base in neighbouring Colorado. We loaded up and set out for the final leg to Brian Head, buzzing with that familiar 'start-of-trip' anticipation. At about midnight, as we sped through the dark desert, I suddenly noticed a suspicious smell in the air.

“Is ganja legal in Utah then? Smells like there's some kind of plantation around here.”

“That'll be skunk,” replied Seb.

“So it's legal?”

“No, it's probably a skunk. Someone will have hit it with their car.”

Did you know that's why some weed is called 'skunk'? It was news to me!



We're feeling geeky, so each of the captions in this story will consist of a random fact about Utah. Here, Dom Harington learns that the name 'Utah' comes from the Native American 'Ute' tribe and means 'people of the mountains'.



Nate Kern well knows that the 'Amped' computer games were designed by a Utah team, and feature many famous local spots. The soundtrack also includes several local bands.



Mike Austin will no doubt be turning up for the Sundance Film Festival, which takes place at Park City, Utah, between 21st and 31st January 2011.

Day 1 - In at the Deep End

On the first morning we were greeted by our mountain guides, Nate and Trevor, plus the local tourism reps Bonnie and Rebecca. They led us down the road to pick up four snowmobiles to use for the day. Seb and Nate Kern had brought two of their own, which meant that between eight people we had six sleds! I tried to keep calm as I was shown to *my very own* snowmobile, but my excitement was soon given away by some heavy use of the accelerator and a lack of use of the brake.

We were led to a picturesque backcountry area called Falls Creek, about 10 miles south of Brian Head resort. As we dropped into the run, massive rock formations of red sandstone towered above us on either side. The line between was steep, fast and opened into a series of cliff drops from 10 to 50ft high. It was one of the most awesome, powder-filled runs I'd ever experienced.

We'd left a few of the skidoo's at the end of the tarmac, and these we used to shuttle us, two by two, back up the trail to the summit. I jumped straight on the first and took Russ on the back. Having only recently discovered a passion for going fast on a snowmobile I was naturally very excited to share it with my friend. So, with the wind bellowing through our visors and the throttle rammed to the handle grip, I went hell for leather up the winding, bumpy trail through the trees. A few minutes later, short of breath, full of adrenaline and smiling from ear to ear, I cut the engine and heard a whimper from behind me. I turned around to see Russ hunched over clutching his sides.

"You !*^%, my ribs! I was shouting to slow down!" (Russ had broken two ribs a few weeks before). My apologies fell on similarly deaf ears and he later told one of the guys he's never getting on a sled with me again.

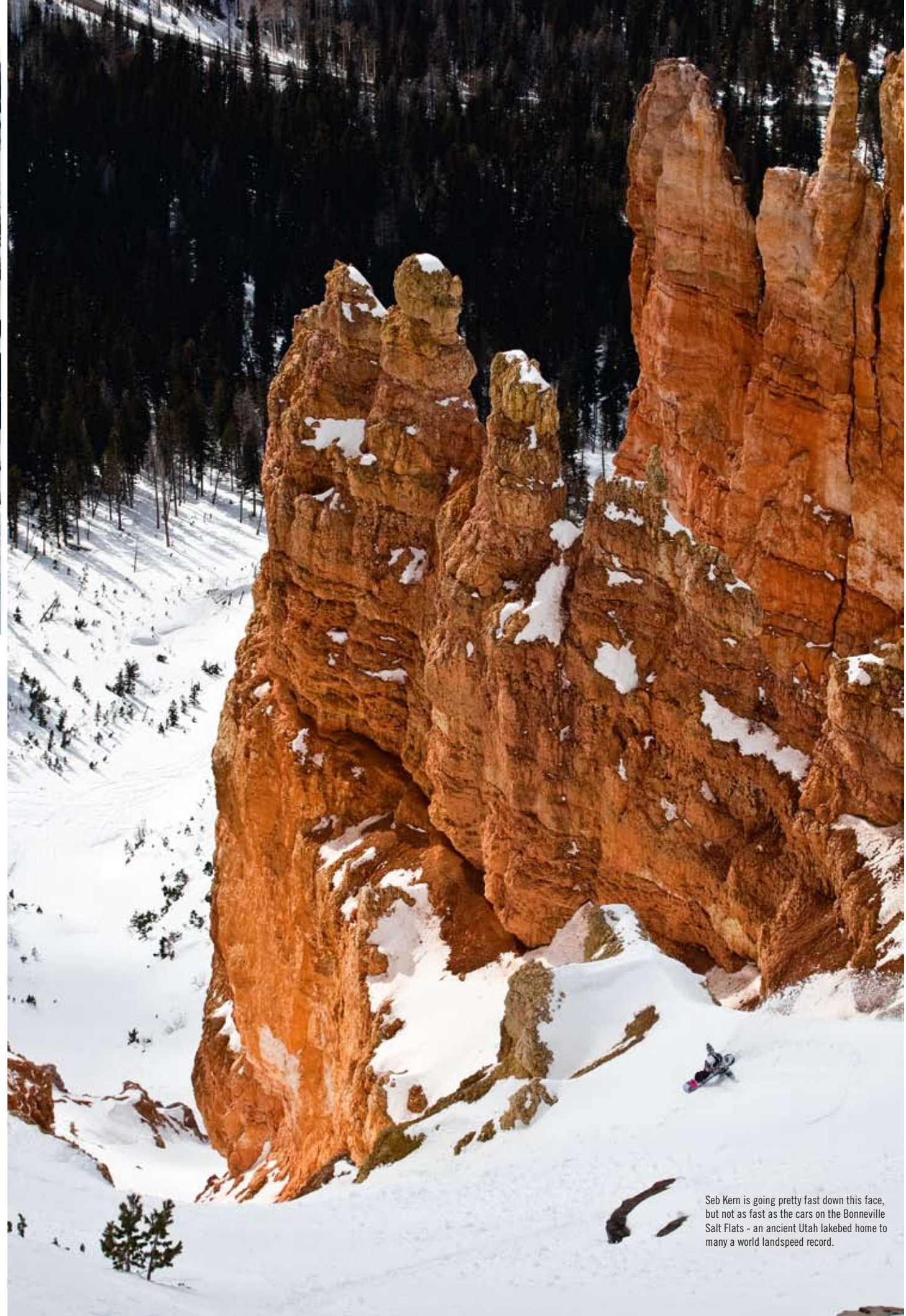
That evening, over a slap-up meal with our hosts in the Grand Lodge Hotel, we discovered that Mormon is the preferred religion of 60 percent of Utah's adult population, including Bonnie our resort Rep. We made a few cautious jokes (although some not so cautious by Russ) but luckily they were open to our British banter and we all had a great time. After some top notch food, some beer, tequila and a game of pool, we finally sloped off full of jet-lag to recharge for another epic day.

Day 2 - Digging for Gold

Keen to build a powder kicker, our group was introduced to a new guide, Seth, who took us up the main chair at Brian Head. We scanned the near and far terrain, looking for that perfect spot featuring a nice run-in, table top and 30+ degree landing. In the end we chose a spot Seth had scoped near the chair. It was a hip style jump, framed by a band of trees (ideal for photos) and which would be easy enough build. After a brief discussion on the plan of attack we got straight to work.

Thanks to this spot's natural transition and Seb's keen eye, we were able to carve out the take-off rather than build the thing from scratch, saving us some serious building time. We then spent the next four or five hours having a great session, pausing only when Russ – crouched happily behind his lens – told us

"Massive rock formations of red sandstone towered above us on either side. It was one of the most awe inspiring, powder-filled runs I've ever experienced"



Seb Kern is going pretty fast down this face, but not as fast as the cars on the Bonneville Salt Flats - an ancient Utah lakebed home to many a world landspeed record.



THE MORMONS

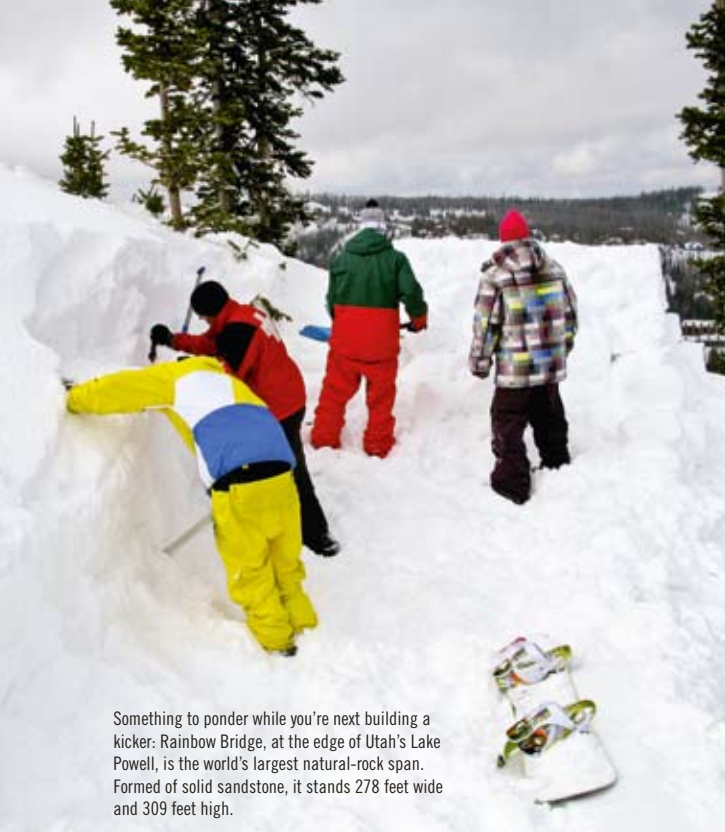
In 1830, a guy called Joseph Smith founded the 'Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints', also known as the Mormon Church, in New York. He claimed to have had visions in which an angel visited him, and to have been shown the location of two gold plates. According to the text inscribed on these plates, Jesus visited America shortly after his resurrection. Smith wrote this chronicle down and inserted it into the Bible as an extra testament, the 'Book of Mormon'.

So far, so wacky. Having gathered a group of followers together Smith then moved further and further inland in search of somewhere to settle (basically, his crew were constantly being driven out of town – accused, amongst other things, of polygamy). Eventually an armed mob assassinated Smith in 1844, and under the guidance of a new 'prophet', Brigham Young, the Mormons marched on, finally settling in a barren-looking desert way out west. Utah.

Today, approximately 60 percent of Utah's residents are Mormon. Salt Lake City is host to over 100 temples which form the geographical basis for the city's grid system (roads are called 'east' 'west' etc. in relation to their nearest temple – pretty confusing to less godly visitors!). Other Mormon quirks include abstaining from caffeine and R-rated movies, and not shitting on a Sunday.*

Famous Mormon shredders include Jibbing Jeremy Jones (whose Burton graphic once featured 'Samuel the Lamanite') and Australian Torah Bright, who recently married fellow snowboarder Jake Welch in Salt Lake. Torah claims never to have drunk or smoked, and shunned sex before marriage. As local rider Ezra Jacobson puts it: "Hot mormon chicks are a tease."

** Some of these facts may be made up.*



Something to ponder while you're next building a kicker: Rainbow Bridge, at the edge of Utah's Lake Powell, is the world's largest natural-rock span. Formed of solid sandstone, it stands 278 feet wide and 309 feet high.

"It would be hard to break the news to Russ and Seb that they'd just missed out on possibly the best powder day of their lives"

to wait for a gap in the cloud. Hats off to our guide Seth – he knew exactly what we were aiming for, helped us build the kicker, filmed with our camera and even fenced the jump off at the end of the day in case we wanted to return (he'd already turned away some local riders who were lurking around).

Day 3 - Into the White Room

The next morning Russ raised his head to the window, where horizontal flakes belted across the glass.

"It's a white out," he said. And lay back down.

About half an hour later Dom knocked on, eager to find out the plan. After the double attack from Dom and myself it was clear Russ's ribs had some serious healing to do, so he was going nowhere. Seb was also glad of an excuse to rest his old back injury. Nate then rustled in, fully suited and booted, followed by his friend Shelby who had come to ride with us for the day.

"We're going to take the sleds and check it out if you're up for it?"

The tempting thought of riding the sleds again had already planted itself in my mind, and shortly afterwards we found ourselves unloading them outside – squinting against the ice droplets which whipped against our hoods and shouting at each other above the wind. After a couple of dodgy moments (word of warning: if you accidentally hit a busy highway, sleds have a turning circle similar to a cross channel ferry) we arrived at the blanketed car park. The lifts were dead and the buildings deserted. An entire ski area shut and blanketed in fresh? This



Dom is fond of telling anyone who'll listen that in 1857, the President of the USA was so pissed off with the mormon's polygamous ways that he sent an army to subdue them.

was going to be fun.

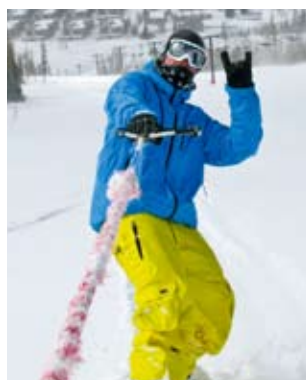
Nate checked the fuel levels and pulled out the tow rope. Then, two up with two towed behind, we powered our way up the lift line. As if we hadn't struck it lucky already, a window opened in the heavens, revealing a vivid blue sky and lighting up the smooth white contours of the slope. As we set off, our boards completely disappeared beneath the surface at times, but it didn't slow us down at all – the snow was so light it just brushed past our legs. Every turn threw up a vast cloud of cold smoke. After ripping around the hill for hours, we finally wound our way back to the hotel, and I realised it would be hard to break

the news to Russ and Seb that they'd just missed out on possibly the best powder day of their lives

Day 4 - Off the Grid

With blue sky and untouched powder everywhere, it was unanimously decided that our last day would be a freeride adventure day. Trevor, our latest guide, had a treat planned for us. We followed his lead, traversing away from the main ski area. Suddenly we were joined by a couple of ski patrollers. They looked experienced and obviously knew the area well, and we all had the feeling we were being led to a definite 'locals' spot. A chairlift on the far side of the resort

Typical Utah powder in freeride meccas such as Alta, Snowbird and Snowbasin can arrive overnight in one-metre dumps with an average H2O density of less than five percent. This can only be described as Mother Nature 'delivering the goods'.



“Word of warning: if you accidentally hit a busy highway, sleds have a turning circle similar to a cross channel ferry”

sat silent as we approached. Only when Trevor got close to the liftie did the motor fire up and the gates open. Whether this had been especially reserved for us I don't know, but the hospitality we'd enjoyed at Brian Head so far suggested that it was. So... just us and a couple of ski patrol guys getting the first lift towards a high peak laden with fresh pow and some nicely spaced pine trees to blast through. Does life get any better?

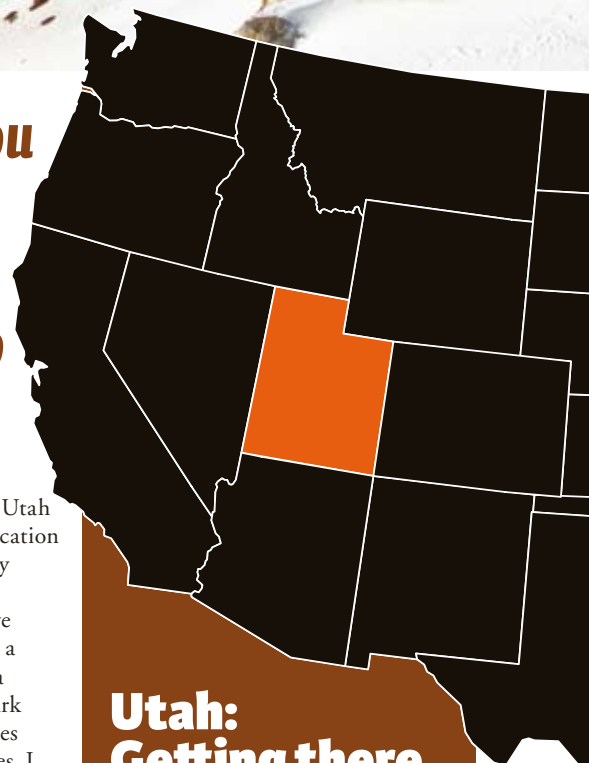
A small hike at the top had us all out of breath. Trevor pointed out that Utah's peaks are, on average, over 11,200 feet – the tallest in the country – hence the lack of oxygen. Strangely enough, though, it didn't feel like we were very high up: the terrain here is mostly rolling hills, with no jagged horizons or snow-covered crags like the Alps. Millions of years ago the mountains would have looked more dramatic, but eons of weathering had settled the landscape into the gentler scenery that lay before us. Next to these mountains, the Alps are relatively young, still being pushed up by the continental plates.

All of this was academic as Trevor took the lead through the trees, showing us what the far side of the resort had to offer. We had epic fun dropping off wind-lips and charging through forests and pow fields. I guess in some ways the experience was similar to freeriding in Europe, but what set this place apart was that the powder

was so light. This was the champagne pow for which Utah is famous – a quirk of its desert climate and inland location – not for nothing do the number plates round here say 'Greatest Snow on Earth'.

On the run home, finally running out of energy, we spotted a freestyle park. For a resort which boasts such a large and varied freeride area, you could forgive them a slightly half-assed approach to freestyle. But no, the park we saw looked well maintained and full of cool obstacles like converted trucks, rainbow rails, boxes and gas pipes. I guess this is America, where they cater for everyone. (Later that week I visited Park City for work, and when it comes to freestyle that place topped the lot – massive kickers, incredible jib lines and a halfpipe longer than anything I'd seen in Europe. This was JP and Jibbing Jeremy's home turf, after all – what else would you expect?)

Overall though, the trip had opened my eyes to what the American backcountry can offer. Utah's Wasatch Mountains might not be as steep as the Alps, but the terrain is incredible. Sledding – illegal in much of Europe – also opens up this whole other side to backcountry riding. You could argue that the pollution, noise, blah blah... whatever. Snowmobiles are fun! Having spent most of my time in France, though, the biggest thing which stood out was the outstanding friendliness of the locals and the welcoming atmosphere. There was no language barrier, all the great food you could eat, cool cars, and of course – snowmobiles! Utah is definitely on my list of places to go back to... Did I mention snowmobiles?! ☺



Utah: Getting there

AIRPORT: Salt Lake City International

FLIGHTS: From approx. £400 rtn.

LIFT PASSES

One-day lift passes cost around \$60 depending on the resort, or you can buy a 'Super Pass' valid at 4 of the bigger resorts (Brighton, Solitude, Snowbird and Alta) for \$310 a week, though with snowboarding banned in Alta(!) the reality is you'll only get to ride 3 of them.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the Grand Lodge in Brian Head: grandlodgebrianhead.com

PACKAGE DEALS

Try crystalski.co.uk and americanskiclassics.com.

MORE INFO

Check out: www.skiutah.com